

The Canal



Little River Canal, Joaquin Rodriguez

I seem to have the hardest time remembering my childhood. Then it comes back in bittersweet glimpses, small, translucent bits and pieces.

Like Pat Flynn — my friend to this day, though I've seen him only once in the last 15 years. He used to live on one of those canals they dug years ago all over South Florida to let Miami rise out of the swamp.

Pat was not only a friend, he was my best friend. Enigmatic, I would describe him now; weird but still cool would have said it

then. Straight black hair dipped low across his forehead —looked tough — only to meet whimsical blue eyes with deep sparkles. Wide, salesman smile giving way to some really raunchy 12-year-old talk.

He tried to be an altar boy, like me; I tried to smoke Winstons, like him. Neither of us made it.

We were as different from each other as Miami is now from what it was then. He dared, I deliberated. He punched people, I negotiated. He was afraid of ghost stories, I was afraid of his neighbor, a regular at juvenile hall. But, even though I never understood why he tattooed his initials on his arm with ink and a pin, we were inseparable..

And we had the canal.

It's good how the feel sifts back: steamy South Florida days, our shirts off, the trace of a breeze carrying a dank smell off the water's edge behind Pat's house. A 13-foot, flat-bottom boat, 18-hp Johnson screaming. Tires thudding on dark, tar-coated beams of the wooden bridge overhead (surely one of the last of its kind in Miami in the '60s), making this a creepy place to swim. I was never crazy about jumping from the bridge's cross-timbers into shadowy black swirls of the water. Pat loved it, of course.

A day-long round-trip to Hialeah:

Going there was no idle meander. For me, it had a purpose. Pat's cousin Paula lived in Hialeah, conveniently, if I remember correctly, on the same canal, or just across the street.

Paula had dark hair and deep, dark eyes and that innocent but intentional sullen sensuality of budding beauty. We kissed — several times — teeth pressed hard against lips pressed hard against lips pressed hard against teeth. It was coy practice for Paula, frivolous favors. She was worshiped and she knew it.

I was in 12-year-old love with Paula, no doubt influenced by the song several years before, "Hey, Hey Paula." And no doubt because she was older, 14 at least.

Paula would spend the night with Pat's sisters, Theresa and Dee Dee. Barely, I recall a party: dancing -- crushing, sweaty, feet-shuffling hugs, actually — to the warble of scratched 45s. When everyone was gone or asleep, we sat in the driveway with an evening breeze crackling the palm -- frond slivers and we talked. It's a shame the words and wonderings have faded.

So, Paula lived by the canal. On summer days, once in a while, Pat and I would cruise over. Actually getting there was far better than being there, which was boring him and awkward for me. Family everywhere – parents, sisters, cousins, aunt, uncle. Pat seemed perpetually engulfed by family. They were good Irish Catholics, the Flynns. Pat's father, Joe, always seemed to look over with this part sardonic part affectionate smile that said, "Boy, What is going to become of you?" (A fair question.) There was Pat's mother, who used to make me feel so good by telling me I was her second son. There was, routinely, an invitation to stay over, and there was usually something good to eat, once in a while a reprimand and occasionally a hug, always embarrassing, always secretly welcome in an uncertain 12-year-old heart.

Getting to Paula's was like being on the Jungle Cruise at Disney World, except you could get really stranded, really out of gas or really eaten by something living at the water's edge. On the way there were reeds and the eerie-looking, creature-hiding slime along the bank, which periodically gave way to the sea walls of expensive houses.

There were alligators. I saw a couple. Pretty disconcerting; we used to ski in that water. There were sea cows, interesting blobs of mammal that we carefully avoided, not so much for Jimmy Buffet or Save the Manatee; it was the horrid thought of hitting one of those big, gentle oddities and sinking into the slime.

Skiing was the main event on the canal. Having been born in New York City, I didn't have any really good reason to know how to water ski. So Pat taught me. The skis were like planks, about a foot wide and six feet long.

The bow shot straight in the air, the Johnson wailed — that distinct and pleasant outboard sound — the air filled with the oddly good smell of blue exhaust smoke and churning water, and then, with a shoulder-wrenching snap, I was up, slumping gracelessly, arms pulled from sockets, watching for logs and sea cows and alligators, heading towards the bend — the place where the canal angled towards Biscayne Bay — Pat yahooping... It was great.

Until I fell. Nothing, nothing was more horrible than waiting in that murky brown water until Pat turned the boat around. (I can't see my legs!) Well, nothing except for something that had happened several years earlier, also involving Pat, myself and the canal.

I can't recall the year I almost died in the canal. But the horrifying moment I realized I was drowning breaks though with unnerving detail and clarity.

I was drifting on an inner tube, 20 to 30 yards from Pat's house. It slipped out and glided gently away. I went after it. Being from New York, I didn't have any really good reason to know how to swim, either. It was just out of reach. I remember making forward progress for two or three grabs, mostly from imitation, and then starting to go under. Going down, seeing the murky water — though it wasn't as bad below, being amber and sun-streaked and sparkling — coming up and yelling, going back down. I managed to bob up and down screaming for what seemed like forever, and I remember seeing Mrs. Flynn in the back yard yelling, and I remember thinking I can't do this anymore, I'm going to drown, because the next time I go under I'm going to breathe water. I can see Pat dive — he could swim like a fish and ski like a champion — and in a flash he was pushing me another tube and pulling me on it and taking me to the shore where his mother, nearly hysterical, said I couldn't go near the canal again until I learned to swim. I did. Pat taught me.

On impulse not long ago, I pulled off the expressway during a visit to Miami. I was drawn to the canal, but also wary of the changes and fragmented memories that haunt an old neighborhood. A more powerful impulse pulled me into Pat's parents' driveway. I thought of Paula.

When no one answered the door, I walked around the back. What was I looking for? I had gone to college, and I don't think Pat had ever finished high school. He was kind of wild — the tattoo, the Winstons, the slicked-back hair. We had long ago drifted apart.

I rounded the corner, and there was the canal, not nearly as wide as I remembered it. To my right, there was Pat, floating in a wading pool with his two or three kids.

Joe was there with that same skeptical look, Theresa was there with a smile, Mrs. Flynn was there with a hug. Pat looked good — no, great. He was working for Florida Power, like Joe. He looked happy.

He said he'd seen my name in the paper several times. I told him, meaning it, that his kids were beautiful. Small but sincere talk. He suggested we walk down by the canal. At water's edge he lit a Winston, offered me one. He was a bit surprised when I took it.

For the next few minutes, best friends shared the breeze, letting translucent memories slip back, mostly in what was unspoken. I never asked what became of Paula. I'm not sure I need to know.

NOTE: I received a several line letter from Paula, who had seen this several years after it was published. It was touching and sweet; I didn't respond (nor did she suggest I do). Perhaps we both knew it was best not to tamper with a memory.

Pat and I didn't stay in touch. Sadly, I learned last year that Pat had died — from lung cancer.